

Reading the Word: The Lector's Ministry

Notes compiled by David Crystal

Your decision

1 If reading is an appropriate ministry for you, you should feel the need to read deep inside you. You will know. It is more than 'I can do this' or 'I want to do this'; it is 'I must do this'. From the time of the apostles, people talk about 'burning' with the word of the Lord. You may have doubts about your ability, or your worthiness - but these doubts are signs that you are being called in the first place.

2 Don't confuse nervousness with ability. Almost everyone is nervous, even highly experienced readers. Judi Dench admits to being really nervous before each performance!

3 Don't think of reading the Scripture in terms of 'right' and 'wrong'. There is so much meaning in these texts, and so many possible nuances, that there's no single best way of reading them. Twenty readers will yield twenty interpretations, and each version can offer something to a congregation. Some readers will be naturally better at reading than others; but all can gain from the way someone else reads.

4 As with everything, it all comes down to preparation and practice. If you prepare well, you'll know your readings better than any other lay person in the church that day. And if you've taken the time to practise the points of movement and technique, you'll have the confidence you need.

5 When a parish begins to take reading seriously, the effect on the liturgy can be dramatic. Many parishes, unfortunately, don't. Reading is seen as something which 'anyone can do', 'just come up and do it'. Yes, any literate person can read a passage aloud. But don't expect that person to involve you emotionally in the liturgy. To do that needs a greater commitment. It also requires some degree of gift. Some people will never make good readers, and there's no reason why they should.

6 Reading is a ministry, and involves your time and commitment, like any other ministry. If you can't find that time and commitment, it is not for you.

General points about technique

7 The first thing you need to do is get a sense of the power and character of your own voice, and how you behave when you are reading aloud. One way of doing this is to record yourself at home, reading into an audio recorder. Or get someone to video you.

8 Do the same thing in front of the microphone in church, when it's empty. Get a friend, or the person organising the readers' list, to sit at the back (not the front) of the church and listen to you. The listener should be listening, and not following the reading in a book. Ask their opinion. Don't believe them if they say you're perfect.

9 Work out how near you need to stand to the microphone. Move it up and down to see how directional it is. Remember that the previous reader might have been taller or shorter than you, and the microphone might have been left at the wrong angle.

10 Find out where the microphone controls are, and how they work, so that you can check it has been turned on, and the volume control is at the right level, before Mass starts - just in case someone else hasn't done it.

11 Never tap the top of a microphone to see that it is on. It isn't necessary, if you've checked the controls in advance. All this does is damage the mike and give the congregation a fright.

12 Be prepared for the occasion when the microphone doesn't work, for whatever reason. You'll need to speak up. Remember to report the fault afterwards.

13 While you're exploring the church acoustics, take a few moments to explore the Lectionary. Look through it and see how it is organized - especially where the special readings are for Saints' days, and the like, which you may need to look for, from time to time.

Preparations - the days beforehand

14 Be sure you know which readings you have to do. Remember they change year by year, and on some Sundays the usual readings may be replaced by those belonging to a special day. Have an up-to-date Missal available at home, so that the version you prepare is the same as the one being used. If you're uncertain, check with the priest or those taking the Word and Communion service that week.

15 Read the text through at least once in the days beforehand. The aim of this is to be sure you understand it. If you don't understand what you're reading, obviously you can't convey the meaning convincingly. If necessary, refer to a Scripture commentary - there are plenty online. If you don't have one, the parish house will.

16 Remember to read the Gospel as well as the two other readings. The First Reading, in particular, will relate closely to it. If you are reading it aloud in a Word and Communion service, prepare it in the same way as the other readings.

17 If the first time you see the readings is the moment you arrive at the lectern during Mass, you're definitely not doing your job well. So, be prepared: and this means getting into the habit of looking at a reading in advance, whether you're down to read or not. The official reader may not turn up, and you may have to do it. Be ready.

18 Understanding comes with reflection: it's not always there as soon as you've read a text for the first time. Therefore allow time to think about the text; pray about it, perhaps. Look for the meaning it has for you, personally. The more you can find relevance in it for yourself, the more you will be able to read it with conviction, thus allowing others to find its relevance.

19 Make sure that, in addition to any silent reading you do by way of preparation, you read the texts aloud at home at least once. This will bring to light any specific difficulties, such as an awkwardly long sentence which may need to be broken up by pauses, or the use of an unfamiliar Biblical name. If you don't know how to pronounce the name of a person or place, check with a dictionary - and again, these days there are websites to help.

Reading technique

20 If you're not used to reading in public, remember that the crucial point is to have enough breath to 'carry' the sense units, some of which are quite long. The main thing is not to run out of breath; if you do, your voice pitch will fall, and you'll get much quieter. Short periods of deep breathing at home will improve your breath control. The technique is to breath in as fully as possible, and to let the breath out as slowly as possible. Get into a deep-breathing frame of mind before you leave for Mass - trying the technique a few times.

21 You'll need to break the reading up into units of sense. Work out what these are in advance. Obviously, the full stops at the ends of sentences are a partial guide; but some of the sentences (e.g. in St Paul) are long, and you'll need to break them down into shorter and more readable units. Don't trust commas, which are usually put in by an editor who hasn't thought of how the text should be read aloud. In some Mass Books, the readings are already printed in short lines, which reflect the sense units; but official Lectionaries don't usually do this.

22 To read something with conviction and sincerity, four principles need to be followed.

- You need to read slowly, much slower than your normal conversational speed - about 180 syllables a minute is a comfortable rate. The main fault of inexperienced readers is that they go too fast. This is especially important in a big room, such as a church, where echoes and people-noise obscure fast speech.
- Be liberal with pauses. To be effective, a main pause (such as at the end of a sentence) needs to be one 'beat' (a tap of the foot).
- Be precise in your articulation. This mainly means paying special attention to the ends of words, making consonants clear. Note especially the need to pronounce the *-t* in *Christ*. Sound out the

'little' words, such as *and* and *of*. This is the main difference with everyday conversation, where we tend to 'swallow' sounds.

- Keep the voice rising, during the reading. Don't let it fall lower and lower, as can so easily happen.

23 If you're reading well, it is your voice which will hold people's attention. They don't need to see you - as listening to good speakers on the radio illustrates. Therefore it isn't necessary for you to look up while you read. Keep your head up, as far as you can, so that your voice projects forwards, and into the mike. But it isn't necessary to be looking at the congregation all the time.

24 However, some readers do find it helpful if they do look at the congregation, because it makes them feel more in touch with their listeners. Some liturgists recommend it. If you do look up, do it in a controlled and confident way. Don't bob your head up and down randomly. Also, avoid the trap of looking at individual members of the congregation - or focusing on just one individual, simply because that person seems to be paying particular attention to you. (This is an easy trap to fall into. If your church uses Mass leaflets, many people will be reading them, especially if they are hard of hearing. Those who don't do this, and prefer to listen, can easily catch your eye.) You don't want, through persistent eye contact, to appear to be accusing someone (via the words of St Paul) of some sin!

25 If you do look up, fix your gaze on a point towards the back of the church, above the heads at the back. Everyone will think you are looking at them. If the church is wide, as well as long, slightly vary the direction each time you look up. Don't try to look both ways at once. And, if you do look up, keep a finger on the place in the text, so that you can find where you are when you look down again.

26 Don't worry about fluffs. Keep going. People don't usually notice. Don't begin a sentence again. And NEVER APOLOGISE. This only draws attention to the mistake.

Preparations - immediately before Mass

27 Arrive early, so that you have time to do your microphone check (see above) and Lectionary check. Go up and ensure that the book is open in the right place, and that you know where your reading is located on the page. Remember that someone in a hurry may have opened it at the wrong year (in the 3-year cycle for Sunday Masses). For weekday Masses, the readings for different years may be printed next to each other. Special readings, such as for a Saint's day, will be at a different place.

28 If it isn't your turn to read, check the rota to see whose turn it is. Look around the church to see if they are there. If not, the best convention is that the reader nearest to the lectern is the one who takes over in an emergency. Agree this convention at a readers' meeting.

29 If it is your responsibility to read the General Intercessions, carry out a similar check. If a book is being used, check that it is open at the right day. If a special sheet is being used, check that it hasn't been moved. Look especially at the items which relate to your own parish - notably, the names of the sick or deceased. If there is a name whose pronunciation is unclear, see if the priest or some other parishioner knows how it should be pronounced. This is another good reason for arriving early.

30 If a choir is taking part in the Mass, check with the choir-leader to see if a cantor is going to sing the Responsorial Psalm and the Gospel Acclamation.

During Mass

31 You are part of the congregation. The Mass is for you as well. You should therefore pray the Mass as fully as you can, along with everyone else. What this means in practice is: don't come up to read too soon. Don't leave your seat in the middle of the Opening Prayer, and walk up while everyone else is praying. This is distracting for them, and it means you miss out on the prayer. Leave it until everyone is about to sit down. There will be a pause while you walk up. That is fine. It gives people time to settle, and to appreciate the reverence of bowing to the tabernacle. But obviously, it makes sense to sit towards the front, when it's your turn to read, so that you don't make the pause overlong. (You need to agree a strategy with the priest or Word and Communion leaders for the General Intercessions - either to wait until the Creed is over before moving, or to come up during the Creed.)

32 Walk up slowly and humbly - but with confidence. As you do so, ask the Holy Spirit for the power to do the job well. You will immediately feel less nervous.

33 Always enter the altar from the centre - which means walking over to the centre aisle (if there are side aisles in your church), if you happen to be sitting to one side. Never sidle up to the lectern from a corner. When you reach the altar, walk up to the altar step, and then bow towards it. On a special occasion, such as when the Bishop is present, you may bow to the celebrant - but any special procedures should be agreed in advance with the parish priest.

34 It is especially important to agree on an approach procedure when more than one reader is involved (one doing the first reading, and one doing the second) - or a reader is joined at the altar by some other person, such as a cantor singing the Responsorial Psalm or Gospel Acclamation. If there are two readers, both should arrive at the altar at the same time, before the first reading, and should stay until after the Gospel Acclamation, when they leave at the same time. It looks awful, and is distracting, if people are coming and going at different times, or if one is bowing and another is genuflecting or doing nothing at all. The same point applies if a group of people are reading the General Intercessions.

35 Never bring up personal leaflets or Mass books for the Readings. All reading should be done from the Lectionary, which is a better symbol of the significance of God's word. (It may even have been carried up in procession earlier in the Mass. If it has, you'll need to open it, and this means you must ensure that a marker is in the right place, before Mass begins.) The only reason readers bring up their Mass book is that they feel uncertain about finding their place in the Lectionary. If you've prepared properly, there's no need to feel uncertain.

36 When you reach the lectern, try to feel relaxed. Stand comfortably, with your weight evenly balanced. Place your hands on the lectern - showing that, for the moment, it is yours. You are in control. Breathe in once deeply (but not so that anyone can see), before you begin.

The actual reading

37 There are several things which have to be read, and each one should be read differently. The core elements, of course, are the scripture readings. These are proclamations: you are proclaiming the Word. They are not everyday statements, nor are they dramatic recitations. You are trying to convey God's word, using your own personality in order to do so, but not in such a way that this gets in front of the message. In church, you are a reader, not an actor.

38 The readings may be preceded by an introduction, taken from the Lectionary or some other source. Whether this is read at all is a matter of parish policy. Often, the priest gives an introduction, which makes any additional introduction unnecessary. If it does fall to you to read an introduction, do it in a fairly relaxed, casual style. This is not part of the proclamation.

39 If you're giving a reading in a language which some members of the congregation may not understand, give them the opportunity of joining in with the thanks at the end of the reading, by telling them what to say: 'The response to the reading is ...'. They will then automatically repeat it, so allow time for that.

40 The proclamation begins with an announcement: 'A reading from the first letter ... ' or 'We read from ... '. This should be loud and elevated in tone. It should be followed by a brief pause. As it is an announcement, you should be looking at the congregation while you say it. Don't say it in the same tone as the following reading. And there's no need to precede it with 'The first reading', or 'The second reading'.

41 The reading concludes with the statement: 'The Word of the Lord'. (If you have in your head 'This is the Word of the Lord', which used to be the form, you will have to make a conscious effort to use the new version, especially if an old edition of the Lectionary is being used, and the old form is in front of your eyes. Sticking a piece of paper over 'This is' helps. It takes a few hours to do the whole book!) This utterance is totally different from the rest of the reading. It is witnessing. This is *you* talking, not the author of the readings. It is your moment. The best effect is if you look up at the congregation at this point, and say the words with raised pitch, in a loud and definite tone. Don't swallow the words, or say them rapidly. Don't say them in the same tone as the rest of the reading. Don't tack them on to the reading. Leave a brief pause at the end of the reading, look up, and give your witness, proudly and firmly.

42 A silence following each reading is strongly recommended, to give the congregation time to reflect on what they have heard. One of the official liturgy documents states: 'The first response to the Word should be silence'. This has no magic length. You will not be able to reflect much yourself, while you're standing up there. (In any case, you've done your reflecting beforehand.) But you must give the people a bit of time. One way of doing this is to read through the first verse of the Responsorial Psalm to yourself. Or count from 1 to 10 - but slowly. While you are standing there, even a short pause will seem an age. Counting to 10 will seem like a lifetime - but it won't to the congregation. A short pause is useless. Don't be pressured away from the lectern by a keen cantor wanting to get on with the Psalm. Turn away when you're ready. If there's an organist, make sure that he/she is aware of this practice. If there's no cantor, and you're reading the Responsorial Psalm yourself, then of course when you start the Psalm is up to you.

43 If there's a pause after the first reading, then there should also be one after the second. But this is often difficult to introduce, because the congregation is 'programmed' to stand up and begin the Gospel Acclamation as soon as the second reading is over. A congregation can be taught to remain seated until asked to 'Please stand for the Gospel Acclamation'. After a while, they come to expect the pause, and stay seated anyway: if there's an organist or other musical accompaniment, they will automatically stand (without needing to be told) when they hear the music beginning the Alleluia. Note that if there's to be an effective pause, it has to be while the congregation is still sitting down. As soon as they stand, they're on to the next part of the Mass, and the reading is over.

44 Ideally, the Responsorial Psalm is 'somebody else's problem'. It should be sung. In most Masses, however, the reader has to do it. It shouldn't be necessary to introduce the Response to the Psalm, by saying something like 'The Responsorial Psalm: the response is ...', though this is widely done. The congregation already knows that the first utterance you make is the response, and that they should say it after you. It is important to give the congregation this moment of practice. It is an aid to their memory and gives them an indication of how the words should be said in unison. If the response is more than seven words long, break it clearly into two parts, so that there is a rhythmical balance. If there are no Mass leaflets, it is essential to say the Response very clearly indeed.

45 The Psalm is best thought of as poetry, and is usually printed in short lines. It can be read in a very elevated tone. But ensure that, at the last line, the pitch of the voice falls, so that the people can hear you have come to an end, and know when they should respond. This is critical when they have no leaflets to follow. In such cases, they will be looking at you, and will know it is their turn to speak when you look up at them. Make sure you do look up, at the end of each verse. You don't have to say the response along with them, but it can help if you do. The sound of your voice will bring the response to mind, for those who have already forgotten what it is or who haven't heard it properly.

46 Some schools teach their children to say the word 'Response' before the response. This is because the children don't usually have enough vocal range or experience to signal the end of a verse clearly. Adult readers should NEVER say 'Response'.

47 The Gospel Acclamation, also, should ideally be sung. If it is not, you may read it without introduction, or (see above) after you say 'Please stand for the Gospel Acclamation' or 'Alleluia'. A parish should agree which words to use here, so that the congregation knows what to expect. Don't elaborate the words, by saying 'to greet the Gospel' or the like. When starting the Acclamation, say the 'Alleluia' loudly and slowly into the microphone. This will trigger a reaction in the congregation, and thereafter you can read along with them, at a low level, as if you were in your seat.

48 The General Intercessions are totally different from everything else you read in church. They are prayers, not proclamations. They are also very personal. So they have their own style. They are usually put together at the last moment, often responding to some immediate need, so you cannot prepare them in the same way as the Readings. You need to arrive early to give yourself time to read them through (see above).

- The Prayers are usually very short, and thus need to be said slowly, otherwise they are over in no time. There should always be a short pause (a couple of foot beats) following each prayer, before you invite the people to respond.

- The invitation formula - 'Let us pray to the Lord', 'Lord hear us', etc - may vary. If a new or unfamiliar response is to be used, the people should be reminded of it at the beginning of the Prayers. For example, you might say, 'Our response today is *Lord hear our prayer*'. It isn't necessary for the people to repeat that response, but some people will automatically do so, so pause before you begin.
- When you invite the people to respond, LOOK UP and proclaim it. The invitation is not something which should be said towards your shoes, or said in the same tone as the prayer. As there are several prayers in the list, each time you look up, look at a different part of the church, or move your head so that you seem to be taking in the whole church. Don't focus on an individual person.
- Pay special attention to the prayers for the sick and the deceased. If these are written on a slip of paper, or taken from a parish bulletin, don't mix them up! Don't read the names as if they were a list, like a list of railway stations. Read each name reverently, as if it was the only name - a close relative of yours. Pause briefly after each name. Remember that there are probably people who love that person listening to you.
- If it is up to you (as opposed to the celebrant) to invite the congregation to silent prayer ('Let us pray for a while in silence'), and to continue afterwards, give them enough time to pray. You will not really be able to pray much yourself at that point. Count to 10 again - slowly.
- These days, an extra prayer (for example, a Hail Mary) is often added at the end. Treat this like the Gospel Acclamation: once you have started it off, follow the speed of the congregation. Don't try to drown them or control them. You will fail. Lower your voice, and join in. Wait for the priest or Word and Communion leader to say the final prayer before leaving the altar.

49 The rota

- Rotas are drawn up by a person appointed, usually on a quarterly basis, with separate rotas for Christmas and Easter, and left at the back of the church. If you know you are going to be away, let that person know in advance.
- If you suddenly find you have to miss your turn, you need to find a replacement. Let the rota organizer know, or if that isn't possible, contact one of the other readers. Depending on parish policy, names and telephone numbers may be on the back of the rota leaflet.
- If, after checking your reading, you feel it is one you would rather not do, simply ask another reader to do it. Similarly, if there are occasions when you would definitely not want to read (e.g. the anniversary of someone's death), tell the organizer. Conversely, if for some reason you want to read on a particular day, do ask. This is especially important if children are reading, and (for example) the text is a complex message from St Paul.

50 Finally, take the opportunity to read something on the Lector's Ministry, from time to time.